

Testimony of  
**Jennine Jordan**  
Government Relations Liaison  
Calista Corporation  
Subcommittee for the Indigenous Peoples of the United States  
Impacts of Climate Change on Tribal Communities

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Hello Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States. My name is Jennine Jordan. I currently serve as the Government Relations Liaison for Calista Corporation, a regional Alaska Native Corporation. Thank you for inviting me to provide a village perspective in this hearing, and to discuss how climate change has affected Newtok, one of the 56 villages within the Calista region. In addition to giving my statement today, I will be submitting additional written testimony for the record.

I am Inupiaq and my family is from the Native Village of Unalakleet, a remote community of about 700 people in the Bering Straits region. I am a shareholder of Unalakleet Native Corporation, my village Corporation, and Bering Straits Native Corporation and CIRI Corporation, my regional Corporations, each of which were created and mandated by Congress through passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, which settled Alaska Natives aboriginal land claims.

I am here to tell you that climate change is affecting Alaska's rural communities. Erosion is the principal threat to the habitability of many Alaska Native villages (USACE 2006, 2009). The Arctic sea ice extent that protects coastal communities is melting. As a result, waves and storm surges are accelerating erosion (GAO 2003, 2009). As a result of coastal erosion, my family's village, Unalakleet, is considered one of the vulnerable communities of Alaska. Unalakleet has been adapting to climate change by building seawalls and raising roads. In 2010, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spent more than \$28 million dollars on infrastructure for Unalakleet, armoring the beach with rocks and a gabion wall. Despite these efforts, my family, my cousins, and the neighbors in my community see the shoreline armoring being chipped away daily. Some folks have moved their homes from town to the hillside, which exemplifies a gradual relocation of Unalakleet to the higher hills in response to climate change.

Throughout the state, local companies and Alaska Native Corporations have pitched in to help communities battling erosion caused by climate change. Calista Corporation through its subsidiary, Brice, has repaired gabion walls and breakwater for decades for villages affected by climate change. We are working currently in St. George and at the Kivalina Airport. We do this because we enjoy working within Alaska to rebuild communities in partnership with the state and federal government.

Newtok, a coastal village of 350 people on the Bering Sea, is one of the first communities in Alaska to migrate to a new site 9 miles away, Mertarvik. Newtok is currently threatened by advancing erosion caused by the Ninglick River adjacent to the village. This progressive erosion, plus

permafrost degradation and seasonal storm flooding threaten the very existence of Newtok. Years of erosion studies show that Newtok must relocate because there is no permanent and cost-effective alternative for remaining at the current village site. According to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates, it will cost \$130 million to move the whole village. Even though Mertarvik and Newtok are only nine (9) miles apart, relocation costs are high due to the fact that there are no roads connecting the two rural Alaskan communities together.

In 2007, the State of Alaska created the Subcabinet on Climate Change, identifying communities in the most critical need of support. The Subcabinet's Immediate Action Work Group identified: Kivalina, Koyukuk, Newtok, Shaktoolik, Shishmaref, and Unalakleet as "six communities in peril." In addition, the U.S. Government Accountability Office identified 31 Alaska communities that are threatened by climate change. Of those, (4) four were considered to be dire: Newtok, Kivalina, Shishmaref and Shaktoolik.

In 2008, I conducted a housing analysis for Newtok while as an intern at the Denali Commission. The housing analysis was a product of the Newtok Planning Group, which was formed in 2006 by representatives from state and federal agencies and NGOs which agreed to coordinate relocation assistance for Newtok. The Newtok Planning Group has published various studies and plans are underway to move the village. These are generally outlined in the *Strategic Management Plan – Newtok to Mertarvik* (2012) listed on the AK Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development's website. More specific plans and much more information on relocating Newtok to Mertarvik is also available there. Numerous federal and state hearings and reports have also been conducted on the relocation of Newtok. Stanley Tom, the former tribal administrator of the Newtok Traditional Council testified on October 11, 2007 at the Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery, outlining the steps Newtok has taken to move to Mertarvik.

The community members' greatest need is for housing at the relocation site of Mertarvik, Alaska. There is such a critical housing shortage in Newtok today that multiple families are living in a single-family home. The Cold Climate Housing Research Center (CCHRC), a nonprofit organization that specializes in building in arctic climates, estimated the community needs a total of 105 houses in Mertarvik – 39 more than the 66 houses standing in Newtok today.

This past summer, four Mertarvik homes were constructed by the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), the area's regional housing authority. In summer 2019, 13 more homes are expected to be built in Mertarvik, bringing the total on site to 21. Securing funding for housing is essential to the relocation process because it will expedite the relocation and provide improved quality of life. For example, occupied housing at Mertarvik will allow the community to become eligible for many traditional state and federal funding programs.

Newtok Village Council and the Lower Kuskokwim School District received \$1 million in funding from the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation to advance housing construction in Mertarvik in 2020. The project will construct two state-of-the-art high energy performance duplexes with solar photovoltaic panels. The duplexes will be the first housing constructed specifically to serve professional populations including teachers, village public safety officers, and public health aides in Mertarvik. These grants address the greatest challenge in Newtok's relocation to Mertarvik – new housing construction. As part of efforts to enable Newtok's relocation to the Mertarvik site,

the Denali Commission is providing match funding for the award issued to Newtok Village Council.

Alaska's rural communities lack critical, access to clean water for drinking, sanitation, and hygiene. The people of Newtok have been living without water or sewer systems for generations. To address this need, the United Methodist Committee on Relief awarded \$943,000 to Newtok to install 21 in-home Portable Alternative Sanitation System (PASS) units in Mertarvik, Newtok's relocation site. PASS units are innovative, low-cost alternatives to piped infrastructure that provide basic sanitation needs including hand washing, clean drinking water, and safe human waste disposal.

### **Conclusion**

Alaskan permafrost, land that typically stayed hard and frozen year-round, has been melting partially due to temperature increases across the state. Larger sea storms sweep the elevated ocean levels over the land and cause erosion into the ocean. This leaves residents vulnerable to the sea. Infrastructure threats will pose an ongoing concern for rural coastal communities, particularly given the high costs of construction in rural Alaska. Alaska is on the front lines of climate change and it is affecting all of our coastal communities. There is a need of federal funds and bipartisan advocates to address climate change due to the federal trust responsibility that the government has with its indigenous peoples. The funds already made available are just a drop in the bucket compared to the dozens of communities in Alaska that will eventually have to relocate due to climate change.

Thank you very much for providing me this opportunity to testify on the impacts of climate change in rural Alaska.

Jennine Jordan  
Government Relations Liaison  
Calista Corporation

## Works Cited

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